

NEBRASKA SUPREME COURT



Office of Public Information

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Training for Attorneys Serving as Guardians ad Litem in Nebraska's Juvenile Court System

The Nebraska Supreme Court has announced the adoption of a new rule regarding training for attorneys appointed to serve as guardians ad litem in juvenile proceedings involving abused and neglected children.

The court rule, which becomes effective April 1, 2007, requires the Administrative Office of the Courts to develop and implement a specialized training program. Training is provided through the Nebraska Supreme Court and will be offered across the state beginning in late fall, 2006. The goal of the new rule is to enhance the understanding of the role, duties, and responsibilities of guardians ad litem in juvenile proceedings involving abused and neglected children.

"The Nebraska Supreme Court believes that a guardian ad litem who fully understands his or her role and responsibilities will significantly assist the Court in determining, in a timely fashion, what is in the best interest of the child," said Chief Justice John V. Hendry.

The rule is an outgrowth of Chief Justice Hendry's Commission on Children in the Courts, which has been working diligently over the past year in identifying areas within the court system which can be improved for the benefit of children.

"The importance of a skilled guardian ad litem cannot be understated when it comes to helping children through the court system," said Omaha Juvenile Court Judge Douglas Johnson, Co-Chair of the Supreme Court's Commission on Children in the Courts.

"Well-prepared, well-educated advocates are a must to help ensure permanency and safety for children across the State of Nebraska."

In addition to the development of a guardian ad litem training requirement, the Supreme Court's Commission on Children in the Courts has addressed other areas of concern in the Nebraska court system.

Significant changes have been made in order to expedite appeals for child abuse and termination of parental rights cases. The need for an expedited appeal process is very important in such cases because the child is waiting for a permanent home while legal matters are being resolved. Working with a subcommittee that has been addressing delays in the appellate process, the Commission recommended, and the Supreme Court instituted, a number of changes to accelerate the process.

The Clerk of the Court has begun placing all abuse/neglect cases on the schedule for oral arguments earlier in the process than other 'non-expedited' cases and the Court will not allow continuances in termination of parental rights cases except under extraordinary circumstances.

An analysis of the impact of these changes indicates that an average time of three months has been cut from the length of time it takes an appeal to work its way through the system (from 11 to 8 months, on average). Further changes are currently in the planning or implementation stages, with the goal of further reductions to the timeframes of these appeals.

In summarizing the Court's efforts thus far, Children's Committee Co-Chair and Chief Judge of the Nebraska Court of Appeals, Everett Inbody stated, "I think it is very important that the courts do everything within their power to move juvenile cases through the system as quickly as possible."

A statewide Children's Summit, to be held in September 2006, is also being planned by the Commission on Children in the Courts. During the Children's Summit, all judges in Nebraska with juvenile court jurisdiction will lead community teams of child protection administrators, attorneys, and others in an effort to streamline and improve the system. National experts will provide training to these teams regarding court practices that can significantly improve outcomes for children. Judges and teams members will then return to their communities and work in a collaborative way to improve their local court systems.

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